

In the instant case, Petitioner claims that he is entitled to relief because his counsel was ineffective for failing to investigate and to call as witnesses Ronnie Brown, Bobbie Brown, Harold Baxley, Ella Baxley, Emily Pulley, and Danny Pulley. The Attorney General provided a Response, asserting that Petitioner's claims are without merit. Petitioner did not file a Reply.

Statement of Facts

Petitioner's biological fifteen-year-old daughter testified that Petitioner began sexually abusing her when she was five years old, and that the abuse continued until she was fourteen. She testified that the abuse began as inappropriate touching, progressing to oral sex, and then sexual intercourse. After Petitioner's daughter told her mother about the abuse, he was arrested. Petitioner testified that he never sexually abused his daughter.

Federal Habeas Corpus Relief

The role of federal courts in reviewing habeas corpus petitions by prisoners in state custody is exceedingly narrow. A person seeking federal habeas corpus review must assert a violation of a federal constitutional right. *Lowery v. Collins*, 988 F.2d 1354, 1367 (5th Cir. 1993). Federal habeas corpus relief will not issue to correct errors of state constitutional, statutory, or procedural law, unless a federal issue is also present. *Estelle v. McGuire*, 502 U.S. 62, 67-68, 112 S. Ct. 475, 479-80, 116 L. Ed.2d 385 (1991); *West v. Johnson*, 92 F.3d 1385, 1404 (5th Cir. 1996). In the course of reviewing state proceedings, a federal court does not sit as a super state appellate court. *Dillard v. Blackburn*, 780 F.2d 509, 513 (5th Cir. 1986).

The prospect of federal courts granting habeas corpus relief to state prisoners has been further limited by the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996. The new provisions of Section 2254(d) provide that an application for a writ of habeas corpus "shall not be granted with

respect to any claim that was adjudicated on the merits in state court proceedings unless the adjudication of the claim: (1) resulted in a decision that was contrary to, or involved an unreasonable application of, clearly established federal law, as determined by the Supreme Court of the United States; or (2) resulted in a decision that was based on an unreasonable determination of the facts in light of the evidence presented in the State court proceeding.” *See Williams v. Taylor*, 529 U.S. 362, 402-03, 120 S. Ct. 1495, 1517-18, 146 L. Ed.2d 389 (2000); *Childress v. Johnson*, 103 F.3d 1221, 1224-25 (5th Cir. 1997). The statutory provision requires federal courts to be deferential to habeas corpus decisions on the merits by state courts. *Moore v. Cockrell*, 313 F.3d 880, 881 (5th Cir. 2002).

A decision by a state court is “contrary to” the Supreme Court’s clearly established law if it “applies a rule that contradicts the law set forth in” the Supreme Court’s cases. *Williams*, 529 U.S. at 405-06. A federal court’s review of a decision based on the “unreasonable application” test should only review the “state court’s ‘decision’ and not the written opinion explaining that decision.” *Neal v. Puckett*, 286 F.3d 230, 246 (5th Cir. 2002) (*en banc*). “Under § 2254(d)(1)’s ‘unreasonable application’ clause, then, a federal habeas corpus court may not issue the writ simply because that court concludes in its independent judgment that the relevant state-court decision applied clearly established federal law erroneously or incorrectly.” *Williams*, 529 U.S. at 411. Rather, that application must be objectively unreasonable. *Id.* at 409. The standard is satisfied only if “reasonable jurists considering the question would be of one view that the state court ruling was incorrect.” *Davis v. Johnson*, 158 F.3d 806, 812 (5th Cir 1998) (internal quotation marks and citations omitted).

The trial court’s factual findings are entitled to a presumption of correctness unless the petitioner can rebut the presumption with clear and convincing evidence to the contrary. *Valdez v.*

Cockrell, 274 F.3d 941, 947 (5th Cir. 2001). A federal district court must be deferential to state court findings supported by the record. *See Pondexter v. Dretke*, 346 F.3d 142, 149-152 (5th Cir. 2003). The AEDPA has modified a federal habeas court's role in reviewing state prisoner applications in order to prevent federal habeas "retrials" and to ensure that state court convictions are given effect to the extent possible under law. *Beel v. Cone*, 535 U.S. 685, 693, 122 S. Ct. 1843, 1849, 152 L. Ed.2d 914 (2002); *see Williams*, 529 U.S. at 404. A state application that is denied without written order by the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, as in the present case, is an adjudication on the merits. *Singleton v. Johnson*, 178 F.3d 381, 384 (5th Cir. 1999); *Ex parte Torres*, 943 S.W.2d 469, 472 (Tex. Crim. App. 1997) (holding a "denial" signifies an adjudication on the merits while a "dismissal" means the claim was declined on grounds other than the merits). Additionally, federal habeas relief is foreclosed if a claim (1) is procedurally barred as a consequence of a failure to comply with state procedural rules, *Coleman v. Thompson*, 501 U.S. 722, 111 S. Ct. 2546, 115 L. Ed.2d 640 (1991); (2) seeks retroactive application of a new rule of law to a conviction that was final before the rule was announced, *Teague v. Lane*, 489 U.S. 288, 109 S. Ct. 1060, 103 L. Ed.2d 334 (1989); or (3) asserts trial error that, although of constitutional magnitude, did not have a "substantial and injurious effect or influence in determining the jury's verdict." *Brecht v. Abrahamson*, 507 U.S. 619, 637, 113 S. Ct. 1710, 1722, 123 L. Ed.2d 353 (1993).

Ineffective Assistance of Counsel

Petitioner claims that he is entitled to relief because his trial counsel was ineffective.

Legal Standard

A petitioner who seeks to overturn his conviction on the grounds of ineffective assistance of counsel must prove his entitlement to relief by a preponderance of the evidence. *James v. Cain*, 56

F.3d 662, 667 (5th Cir. 1995). In order to succeed on a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel, a habeas corpus petitioner must show that “counsel’s representation fell below an objective standard of reasonableness,” with reasonableness judged under professional norms prevailing at the time counsel rendered assistance. *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668, 688, 104 S. Ct. 2052, 2065, 80 L. Ed.2d 864 (1984). The standard requires the reviewing court to give great deference to counsel’s performance, strongly presuming counsel exercised reasonable professional judgment. *Id.* at 690. The right to counsel does not require errorless counsel; instead, a criminal defendant is entitled to reasonably effective assistance. *Boyd v. Estelle*, 661 F.2d 388, 389 (5th Cir. 1981); *Rubio v. Estelle*, 689 F.2d 533, 535 (5th Cir. 1982); *Murray v. Maggio*, 736 F.2d 279 (5th Cir. 1984). Secondly, the habeas petitioner “must show that there is a reasonable probability that, but for counsel’s unprofessional errors, the result of the proceeding would have been different. A reasonable probability is a probability sufficient to undermine confidence in the outcome.” *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 694. Petitioner must “affirmatively prove,” not just allege, prejudice. *Id.* at 693. If he fails to prove the prejudice component, the court need not address the question of counsel's performance. *Id.* at 697.

Failure to Investigate and Call Certain Witnesses

Petitioner asserts that his trial counsel was ineffective for failing to investigate and for failing to call numerous witnesses to testify: Ronnie Brown, Bobbie Brown, Harold Baxley, Ella Baxley, Emily Pulley, and Danny Pulley. A defendant who alleges a failure to investigate must allege with specificity what the investigation would have revealed and how it would have altered the outcome of the trial. *Gray v. Lucas*, 677 F.2d 1086, 1093 (5th Cir. 1982). “[C]omplaints of uncalled witnesses are not favored, because the presentation of testimonial evidence is a matter of trial strategy and

because allegations of what a witness would have testified are largely speculative.” *Buckelew v. United States*, 575 F.2d 515, 521 (5th Cir.1978).

Furthermore, the presentation of witness testimony is essentially strategy and, thus, within the trial counsel’s domain. *Alexander v. McCotter*, 775 F.2d 595, 602 (5th Cir.1985). A petitioner must overcome a strong presumption that his counsel’s decision in not calling a particular witness was a strategic one. *Murray v. Maggio, Jr.*, 736 F.2d 279, 282 (5th Cir. 1984). Where “the only evidence of a missing witness's testimony is from the defendant,” claims of ineffective assistance are viewed with great caution. *United States v. Cockrell*, 720 F.2d 1423, 1427 (5th Cir.1983), *cert. denied*, 467 U.S. 1251, 104 S. Ct. 3534, 82 L. Ed.2d 839 (1984). Moreover, to succeed on the claim, Petitioner must have shown that had counsel investigated, he would have found witnesses to support the defense, that such witnesses were available, and had counsel located and called these witnesses, their testimony would have been favorable and they would have been willing to testify on Petitioner’s behalf. *Alexander*, 775 F.2d at 602; *Gomez v. McKaskle*, 734 F.2d 1107, 1109-10 (5th Cir. 1984), *cert. den.*, 469 U.S. 1041 (1984). Conclusory claims are insufficient to entitle a habeas corpus petitioner to relief. *Woods*, 870 F.2d at 288; *Schlang*, 691 F.2d at 799.

In the present case, Petitioner has failed to produce any evidence of what further investigation would have revealed and how it would have changed the outcome. Absent evidence in the record, a court cannot consider a petitioner’s conclusory assertions on a critical issue. *Ross v. Estelle*, 694 F.2d 1008, 1011 (5th Cir. 1983).

Petitioner also makes a conclusory allegation that the witnesses could have ruled out the possibility of the victim’s multiple assaults. He alleges that, because the walls of the house were very thin, any of the residents in the house could have heard sexual activity or the victim’s knocking

on the wall, as she asserted she did. However, he has presented no evidence in support of his conclusory allegation. Petitioner has failed to supply the court with affidavits regarding the substance of the uncalled witnesses' testimony. He has not shown that the uncalled witnesses would have appeared at trial and testified. In sum, he has wholly failed to meet his burden.

Petitioner has also failed to overcome the presumption that trial counsel was not acting on trial strategy. Unsupported assertions are not sufficient to overcome the strong presumption that the decisions regarding witnesses and evidence were not part of counsel's trial strategy. *Alexander*, 775 F.2d at 602; *Murray*, 736 F.2d at 282. The State's denial of these claims was reasonable.

Additionally, Petitioner has failed show that, but for counsel's alleged errors, the result of the proceeding would have been different. *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 694, 104 S. Ct. at 2068. He has failed to rebut the presumption of correctness given to the State court's findings and show how the State's denial of this claim was an unreasonable application of federal law. *Valdez*, 274 F.3d at 947.

Certificate of Appealability

An appeal may not be taken to the court of appeals from a final order in a habeas corpus proceeding "unless a circuit justice or judge issues a certificate of appealability." 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c)(1)(A). Although Petitioner has not yet filed a notice of appeal, it is respectfully recommended that this Court, nonetheless, address whether she would be entitled to a certificate of appealability. *See Alexander v. Johnson*, 211 F.3d 895, 898 (5th Cir. 2000) (A district court may *sua sponte* rule on a certificate of appealability because "the district court that denies a petitioner relief is in the best position to determine whether the petitioner has made a substantial showing of a denial of a constitutional right on the issues before the court. Further briefing and argument on the very issues the court has just ruled on would be repetitious.").

A certificate of appealability may issue only if a petitioner has made a substantial showing of the denial of a constitutional right. 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c)(2). The Supreme Court fully explained the requirement associated with a “substantial showing of the denial of a constitutional right” in *Slack v. McDaniel*, 529 U.S. 473, 484, 120 S. Ct. 1595, 1604, 146 L. Ed.2d 542 (2000). In cases where a district court rejected a petitioner’s constitutional claims on the merits, “the petitioner must demonstrate that reasonable jurists would find the district court’s assessment of the constitutional claims debatable or wrong.” *Id.*; *Henry v. Cockrell*, 327 F.3d 429, 431 (5th Cir. 2003). “When a district court denies a habeas petition on procedural grounds without reaching the petitioner’s underlying constitutional claim, a COA should issue when the petitioner shows, at least, that jurists of reason would find it debatable whether the petition states a valid claim of the denial of a constitutional right and that jurists of reason would find it debatable whether the district court was correct in its procedural ruling.” *Slack*, 529 U.S. at 484.

It is respectfully recommended that reasonable jurists could not debate the denial of the Petitioner’s § 2254 petition on procedural grounds, nor find that the issues presented are adequate to deserve encouragement to proceed. *Miller-El v. Cockrell*, 537 U.S. 322, 327, 123 S. Ct. 1029, 134, 154 L. Ed.2d 931 (2003) (citing *Slack*, 529 U.S. at 484). Accordingly, it is recommended that the Court find that the Petitioner is not entitled to a certificate of appealability as to her claims.

Recommendation

It is therefore recommended that the petition be denied and the case dismissed with prejudice. It is further recommended that a certificate of appealability be denied.

Within fourteen (14) days after receipt of the magistrate judge's report, any party may serve and file written objections to the findings and recommendations contained in the report.

A party's failure to file written objections to the findings, conclusions and recommendations contained in this Report within fourteen days after being served with a copy shall bar that party from *de novo* review by the district judge of those findings, conclusions and recommendations and, except on grounds of plain error, from appellate review of unobjected-to factual findings and legal conclusions accepted and adopted by the district court. *Douglass v. United Servs. Auto Ass'n*, 79 F.3d 1415, 1430 (5th Cir. 1996) (*en banc*).

SIGNED this 12th day of January, 2012.



DON D. BUSH
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE